

Opening Statement
Chairman Dan Burton
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Committee on International Relations
Title: “*Gangs and Crime in Latin America*”
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Today the Subcommittee will examine the growing threat of street gangs on security and stability in Latin America and the United States. Gangs of various kinds have existed in the United States and Latin America for years, traditionally in large metropolitan areas. In recent years, however, gang activities have grown increasingly violent and have spread to smaller cities as well as rural areas.

According to the United States Department of Justice, some 30,000 gangs with about 800,000 members operate in the United States. They range from small local groups to large multi-state and multi-national organizations; their growth was fueled by the explosive use of illegal drugs in the United States during the 1980s. A 2001 survey by the National Youth Gang Center showed that while all racial groups are represented in street gangs, nearly half of all members are Hispanic, many of them the children of illegal immigrants.

Today’s high profile street gangs are a different, more dangerous breed than their predecessors. Although just as violent as the gangs of the past, today’s street gangs are more organized with members holding clandestine meetings to exchange guns and drugs, plot strategies, target enemies and share intelligence information on law enforcement; all the hallmarks of a criminal syndicate or terrorist network.

Traditionally, the formation of street gangs has been linked to poverty, poor education and crime. As we have discussed over the past several weeks, many countries in Latin America exhibit a great deal of the domestic factors that can foster the development of gangs. Highly urbanized populations, growing youth populations facing stagnant job markets, rising domestic drug addiction, and an absence of the political will to fight crime have led to the development of gang movements and have conspired to give Latin America the dubious distinction of the most violent region in the world. These high crime rates destabilize Latin American society by undermining support for democratic institutions charged with providing public security, by inhibiting economic development, by reducing tourism and investment, and by increasing insurance and security costs for firms wishing to do business in the region; and finally they erode the strength of civil society by discouraging people’s participation in community activities.

It has been said that, “weak states pose as great a threat to our national security as strong states.” Central American gangs clearly pose a serious threat to our region’s stability through their involvement in human and drug trafficking, auto and weapons smuggling; and kidnapping.

Within the last few days there have been newspaper reports in Mexico claiming that members of the Mexican Drug Cartels may have acquired sophisticated surface-to-air shoulder-fired missiles. Gang involvement with the cartels has been confirmed, and although no solid credible evidence has yet emerged of a connection between the Central American gangs and Al-Qaeda, some law enforcement officials have speculated on the positive benefits to both groups of such a linkage.

States in the region that do not overcome their “cultures of lawlessness” pose a serious risk to our national security. We must fully understand this and recognize that the region’s crime problems are OUR problems as well; and that we have a responsibility to help.

I am encouraged that the United States government has become increasingly concerned and engaged on solving the problem of transnational gangs. In 2002, USAID partnered with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence to provide technical assistance to help Central American governments collect better crime statistics.

In December 2004, the FBI created a special task force focused solely on combating the Mara Salvatrucha; also known as MS-13, considered one of the largest, best organized street gangs in the United States, and one notorious for its violence. On February 23, 2005, the task force announced the creation of a liaison office to be located in San Salvador and tasked with coordinating regional information-sharing and anti-gang efforts. Just this past Friday, on April 15th, the FBI announced an agreement with Mexican authorities to share intelligence on MS-13, particularly as it relates to the gang’s activities in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Chiapas has become a central point of focus because of the gang’s de facto control of trains that carry stowaways from southern Mexico to the U.S. Border.

The Department of Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement division has created its own national anti-gang initiative, code-named “Operation Community Shield,” that has already conducted raids in several cities – notably Los Angeles, Baltimore, New York, Miami, Washington, DC, and Newark, New Jersey - rounding up hundreds of gang members for involvement in drugs, prostitution, gun-running, and human smuggling. Operation Community Shield will also work through overseas offices to coordinate activities with foreign governments that are experiencing gang problems.

Furthermore, I understand that the U.S. State Department is even developing a new anti-gang initiative that would include economic programs to address the socioeconomic roots of the gang problem.

The Bush Administration has also created the trilateral “Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) of North America” in conjunction with Mexican President Fox and Canadian Prime Minister Martin. Although not a specific anti-gang initiative, the SPP will strengthen and expand trilateral cooperation in the areas of immigration, border integrity and security policies.

Increased cooperation on immigration and border integrity is particularly important to winning our battle against the gangs. Our great nation has always welcomed and embraced diversity, and the 39 million people living in America of Hispanic heritage currently constitute the largest minority group living in the United States. However, between 2000 and 2004 the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States jumped 25%, with more than 50% of that growth attributable to Mexican nationals living illegally in the United States.

There is strong evidence that our porous borders are providing easy passage for gang members and illegal immigrants, and the children of illegal immigrants are prime targets for gang recruitment. The inescapable conclusion is that we must tighten our borders. How we do that without stifling legal immigration is of course the challenge. Nevertheless, we must rethink our border patrol strategies and tactics, and likewise, we must also rethink what we do with illegal immigrants, particularly those involved with the gangs, once we catch them. For example, we know that gang members who are arrested in the United States and deported are making their way back into the United States, and by the same token, influencing and expanding their recruitment of new members in Mexico and Central America along the way. Simply exporting our problems obviously isn't the solution.

In the end, we need to look for new and innovative ways to strengthen international cooperation to fight gangs and crime; and we need to marshal the financial resources to do this in a robust manner. With the limited time we have today, we cannot solve this problem. But we will attempt to address the roots of the proliferation of gangs in our hemisphere, and examine the damage they cause to communities. Further, we will look at how new members are targeted, recruited into, and retained by these gangs and the role of gangs in narcotics trafficking, money laundering, the illegal sex trade, and numerous other illicit activities.

Our distinguished witnesses will offer their perspective on these issues, and hopefully make a few constructive recommendations, on how we can strengthen our national anti-gang initiatives into a comprehensive, coordinated hemisphere-wide response to these phenomena. I look forward to their testimony.